

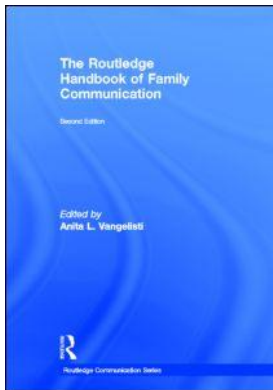
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Part IV
The Relational Communication
of Family Members

Mothers and Fathers Coparenting Together

*John M. Beaton, William J. Doherty,
and Lisa M. Wenger*

The coparenting relationship between mothers and fathers is a central feature of family life, however, the coparenting relationship was mostly ignored by family scholars and researchers until at least the mid 1990s. The construct of “coparenting” was usually synonymous with postdivorce coparenting and confined to the study of conflict and cooperation across households. It is only in the past 15 years that both family theory and research directly assessing multiple dimensions of coparenting has exploded.

One explanation for the neglect of coparenting (at least outside of divorced families) is that the field is just beginning to absorb family systems theories concepts that are prominent in family therapy. Whereas family researchers in psychology and interpersonal communication were invested in dyadic formulations of family relationships (e.g., husband–wife, parent–child), family therapists have long focused on triadic interactions, claiming that the triad is the minimal unit needed for understanding family communication (Bowen, 1976; Minuchin, 1974). Triads allow for examining the influence of one relationship, such as the mother–father relationship, on a third member of the family, such as a child. A triadic analysis also illuminates how one relationship affects another, such as how the marital relationship affects the father–child relationship. Beyond family therapists, it is only in the past 15 years that family researchers have studied coparenting dynamics intentionally. Even less theory and research has focused on how mothers and fathers coparent multiple children who have relationships with one another (polyadic relationships).

Why did triadic, family systems models become appealing to family researchers only during the 1990s? We note that this was the decade of powerful research findings on the negative impact of marital and coparental conflict on parent–child relations and children’s well-being in intact families (see review by Erel & Burman, 1995) and of parallel findings in studies of postdivorce families. Beyond the empirical findings, we believe that scholars became disenchanted with the over simplifications of dyadic models of family communication and decided to take the plunge into family systems theory by trying to operationalize heuristically interesting ideas that family therapists had observed but never measured. Jay Belsky (1981) and Patricia Minuchin (1985) were early theoretical leaders in this integration of developmental and family systems theories.

More recently, scholars have provided innovative theoretical models about coparenting in an effort to guide future research and intervention (e.g., Doherty & Beaton, 2004; Feinberg, 2003; McHale, 2007a; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). Yet, with the exception of Doherty and Beaton (2004), marital status has not been used as a central theoretical construct and research variable in coparenting relationships. This is surprising because there is a consensus that positive marital relationships typically lead to more effective coparenting and increased parental involvement, especially for fathers (Burney & Leerkes, 2010; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Isacco, Garfield, & Rogers, 2010; Morril, Hines, Mahmood, & Cordova, 2010; Van Egeren, 2004). It appears that marriage has been assumed in this literature, and that this assumption has led to less robust theorizing about how the structure of the coparenting relationship (married, cohabiting, romantic but not living together, never-married and broken up, and divorced) affects coparenting dynamics and child outcomes. This chapter will offer a broad framework for coparenting that includes marital status as a fundamental variable. The outline of this chapter follows its purposes: to summarize contemporary research on coparenting within heterosexual families, to delineate theoretical frameworks that can be fruitful for understanding the coparenting relationship, to offer a theoretical model of factors influencing coparenting, and to suggest innovative areas for further research.

Review of Coparenting Research

Although Belsky (1981) did not explicitly focus on coparenting in the early 1980s, he proposed that parenting was influenced by multiple systems: parent, marital, and child subsystems. He argued that the marital relationship was the most important support system for parents. That is, in order to understand the influence of parenting on child development, consideration must be given to the marital relationship. In later work, Belsky (1984) developed a pioneering theoretical framework to study how parenting was multidetermined by parents' developmental histories, personalities, marital relations, employment characteristics, social networks, and individual child characteristics. This framework set the stage for future theory and research that focused on both dyadic and triadic relationships.

Lewis, Owen, and Cox (1988) were among the first researchers to study both dyadic and triadic relationships: the marital relationship, mother-child relationship, the father-child relationship, and the mother-father-child relationship. They discovered that the parents' positive marital quality prenatally predicted higher levels of parental investment at three months and one year following birth. Although Lewis et al. did not focus specifically on the coparenting relationship, their research was the first of many other studies that would investigate how marital relationships influence parental involvement (see Erel & Burman, 1995). Philip and Carolyn Cowan (1999) investigated how marital relationships impact coparenting over time. In a 10-year longitudinal intervention study, the Cowans followed couples expecting their first child. They found that declining marital satisfaction measured at three time periods (pregnancy and when the child was 1.5 and 3.5 years old) was associated with low warmth in mother-child and father-child interactions at age 3.5.

An important distinction that has emerged in the field is between the coparenting relationship and the couple relationship (which almost always has been the marital relationship, given the samples used). Numerous studies have shown how supportive coparenting has positive outcomes for child development beyond the quality of the marital relationship. McHale (1997, 2007b) was a pioneer in studying coparenting distinct from marital and

parent–child relationships. Previous research primarily focused on coparenting within the marital relationship, and measures were comprised of marital satisfaction items as opposed to triadic coparenting items. In assessing triadic interactions, he found that increased marital distress leads to more hostile/competitive parenting and imbalances of mother and father involvement. Moreover, the interplay between the quality of the marital relationship and a child’s gender affected parental involvement. In the face of marital distress, boys were more likely to encounter hostile/competitive coparenting, whereas girls were more likely to encounter larger discrepancies in coparental involvement. McHale’s research on the coparental relationship set the foundation for further research in this area.

Belsky, Crnic, and Gable (1995), with a sample of mothers, fathers, and their toddler boys, discovered that parents with similar individual psychological attributes had more positive coparenting relationships. The more mothers and fathers differed on characteristics of introversion and extraversion, the more likely they were to engage in unsupportive coparenting behaviors. Furthermore, Belsky et al. discovered that coparenting dynamics and whole-family dynamics played distinctive roles in the development of behavioral inhibition in children, beyond the child’s temperament, individual parenting, individual parent well-being, and marital quality.

McHale and Rasmussen (1998) found that family warmth during infancy was associated with men’s positive coparenting practices (self-reported) when the child was age 3, which in turn were linked to fewer internalizing and aggressive behaviors in preschool. In a breakthrough study, McHale, Lauretti, Kuersten-Hogan, and Rasmussen (2000) did observational assessments of both dyadic (parent–child) and triadic (mother–father–child) interactions. This was one of the first studies to investigate potential differences in how parents behave in these two contexts. The authors discovered that maternal and paternal behaviors within parent–child dyadic observations are very different from maternal and paternal behaviors within whole-family dynamics.

As momentum on coparenting research increased, new researchers were drawn to the area, and theoretical discussions increased. Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) proposed a model of coparenting based on three dimensions: conflict between parents, cooperation between parents, and triangulation (a condition that occurs when a parent forms a coalition with a child that undermines the other parent). Margolin et al. found that coparenting dynamics were a function of a child’s age, parents’ gender, and a child’s gender. Between married parents of preadolescents they observed marital conflict discussions concerning a child-related topic. They divided couples along the categories of hostility/defensiveness and agreeableness/problem solving. Couples who were more agreeable and displayed more problem-solving skills scored higher on total coparenting. In a follow-up study of their longitudinal sample, Cowan and Cowan (2003) began to focus more explicitly on coparenting using an observational coding system to study parents’ interaction style in the presence of a child. Their results indicated that when parents showed displeasure with one another in the form of anger and disagreement, children showed higher levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors in first grade.

More recently, McHale and Rotman (2007) followed mothers, fathers, and their first child from pregnancy through the toddler years. They found that positive prebirth expectations among both parents during pregnancy were associated with high levels of coparenting solidarity at 12 months, and for fathers this association was also evident at 30 months postbirth. In addition, Brown, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, and Neff (2010) studied coparenting and parental sensitivity with 3.5 month old infants, and later assessed parental attachment at age one. They found that positive coparenting at 3.5 months was later

associated with father–child secure attachments. Finally, in a meta-analysis with 59 studies, Teubert and Pinquart (2010) concluded that coparenting plays an important role in predicting positive child outcomes, even after accounting for mother’s and father’s parenting practices and marital health.

In summary, a growing body of research demonstrates the importance of coparenting relationships in families and the value of a triadic approach to studying families. Prominent conceptualizations of the coparenting relationship focus on the dimensions of conflict, cooperation, and triangulation with a child. Evidence is mounting that the coparenting dynamics have effects on child development and adjustment beyond the effects of individual parenting practices and that each parent behaves differently in and out of the presence of the other. Research findings also highlight the importance of building strong prenatal coparenting relationships early on between mothers and fathers (particularly for fathers), and the need for researchers to account for issues of child’s gender, age of child, and multiple children.

Theoretical Frameworks

Until recently, coparenting research has been more descriptive than theory driven, with the literature concentrating on characterizing coparenting patterns, developing assessment tools, and examining influences on children’s adjustment. Both Feinberg (2003) and McHale et al. (2004) have developed innovative theoretical frameworks to guide coparenting research and intervention. Feinberg’s comprehensive ecological framework focuses on coparenting as the central mediating and moderating factor that influences individual parental characteristics, parenting practices, and child factors. By contrast, McHale et al.’s coparenting framework highlights the importance of considering coparenting structure, coparenting definitions, and specific comprehensive assessment tools needed to measure coparenting dynamics accurately. McHale et al.’s framework also makes important links between coparenting and adult development. Finally, both Feinberg and McHale et al. advocate for more research with diverse family systems, both in terms of racial diversity, and coparenting relationships beyond mother-father dyads (e.g., grandparents, teen parents, single parents, gay and lesbian parents). From our perspective, the majority of McHale et al.’s and Feinberg’s assumptions are rooted in four foundational theoretical frameworks. Next we briefly discuss these four theoretical frameworks that can shed light on the coparental relationship. We will conclude this section by presenting an updated theoretical framework (see Doherty & Beaton, 2004) based on these four theoretical frameworks to guide research and intervention on factors that influence the coparental relationship.

Social constructionism seems an ideal fit for understanding the coparental relationship. As developed by Berger and Luckman (1966) and a variety of symbolic-interactionist scholars, social constructionism emphasizes the shared construction of a social reality by the participants in a relationship. From this perspective, social roles are created through ongoing interaction and through the negotiation of mutual expectations in the context of broader cultural norms. A social constructionist view of coparenting would stress how the creation of a couple’s coparental relationship begins from the first time they discuss children and parenting. The negotiation process becomes more intense when they are expecting their first child together, and a negotiated coparenting relationship is set in motion quickly after the baby is born. Some aspects of coparenting may be openly negotiated, such as who will work more for pay and who will stay home more with the

child, whereas other aspects are decided implicitly, as in situations where both assume the mother's preeminence as a child care expert and the father's auxiliary role. From a social constructionist standpoint, when researchers observe a couple interacting with their child in the laboratory, they are witnessing the public demonstration of a coparenting relationship that has been worked out over many interactions and will continue to be worked out over time.

Family systems theoretical frameworks have served as a principal framework for much of the coparenting research. As articulated by Bowen (1976), Minuchin (1974), and others, family systems theory focuses on multiple simultaneous interactions in the family, with particular reference here to the triangular relationship consisting of the parents and a child. As mentioned earlier, family systems theory allows the researcher to focus on triadic interactions, not just the dyadic interactions that are the forte of social constructionism. It also can illuminate the ways in which parents develop complementary or competitive relationships with each other. The work of Bowen also points to the influence of each parent's family of origin on current coparental dynamics.

Family development theoretical frameworks are important for understanding coparenting over time. As articulated by Aldous (1978), and Hill and Mattessich (1979), family development theories emphasize the changing structures and roles in the family as members grow older and the family undergoes important transitions. From this perspective, the developmental tasks of coparenting differ considerably depending on the family's life stage, from coparenting an infant to coparenting an adult child, and the number of children in a family. And of course, children in the family might be at considerably different developmental stages, requiring complex coordination of coparenting roles, with, say, one parent being more central to the younger child and the other parent being more central to the older child. Researchers have just begun to tap into the complexities of coparenting from a family life cycle perspective.

Human ecology theoretical frameworks focus on the interdependent web of personal, familial, and community influences on human development and functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Whereas the previous three frameworks emphasize intrafamilial dynamics, ecological frameworks concentrate on the niches within which children and families function, from the surrounding community systems to the broader societal and environmental systems. From this perspective, coparenting plays out in a complex ecology of social and economic influences. Using an ecological framework, Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) summarized research showing that fathering is influenced more strongly by ecological factors than mothering is. Coparenting researchers have looked at the influence of the marital relationship and childhood factors on the coparenting relationship, but have only begun to examine the influence of broader ecological factors (see Feinberg, 2003).

A Theoretical Framework of Influences on the Coparental Relationship

Integrating elements of the four frameworks discussed previously, we have developed a model of influences on coparenting (see Figure 14.1). The focal point of the model is the triadic mother–father–child relationship, with the lines connecting the three participants representing how they mutually construct the coparenting relationship through ongoing systemic interaction and negotiation of roles. The bidirectional arrows represent how individual factors in the model influence each other in a reciprocal manner. Because the marital status of the parents is such an important context for coparenting, we include this

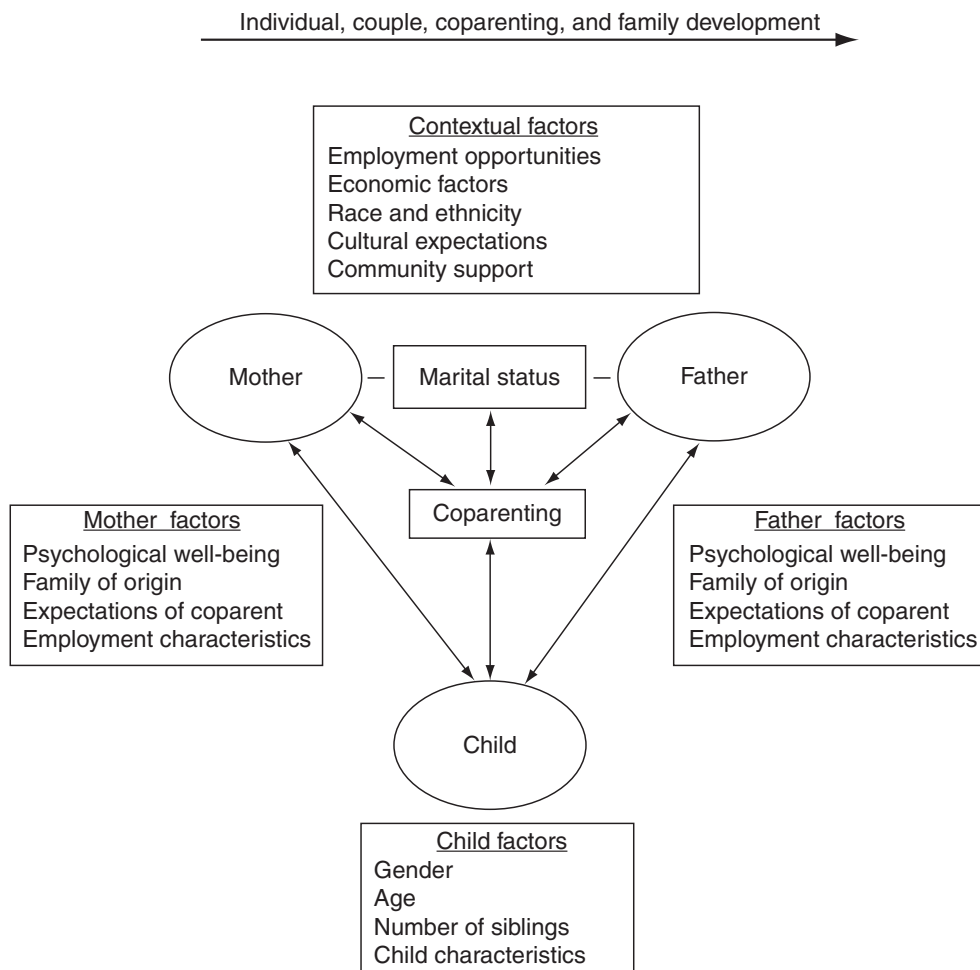


Figure 14.1 Influences on the Coparental Relationship

variable within the triangle itself, indicated by dashes rather than by a straight line because obviously not all mothers and fathers are married to each other. The straight lines indicate the coparenting relationship, which in turn is influenced by whether or not the parents are married. For simplicity's sake, we omit cohabitating relationships, which vary considerably in commitment from a functional marriage-like relationship to a transitory relationship of convenience.

Outside the triangle are depicted several categories of influences on the coparental relationship: individual factors in the mother and father, child factors, mother–father relationship factors, and broader ecological factors. The top line in the model depicts the arrow of time, which stands for the developmental process of the individuals involved, the evolving couple, the family and coparenting system, and the changing nature of the ecological influences. In this theoretical framework, we attempt to capture key elements of the four frameworks outlined previously as they help us understand the dynamics of coparenting relationships. We offer the theoretical framework for heuristic

purposes as a guide to further research and intervention. For some domains of the theoretical framework, there is considerable research evidence for the influence of the variables (e.g., mothers' expectations about fathering), whereas for other domains there is relatively little at this time.

The Impact of Marital Status

As discussed before, variation in marital status and family structure are invisible in most theoretical frameworks of coparenting. One reason may be that most of the research on coparenting has been done by psychologists who focus on process and quality issues but not the more sociological variable of family structure. The main case for looking at marital status comes from compelling evidence that father involvement is tied to the endurance of the relationship bond with the mother. In the absence of a marriage, father bonds and coparenting quality are at risk over time. The Fragile Families Study and Child Well-Being Survey of Low-Income Urban Parents found that married fathers also reported higher levels of coparental support and father involvement than unmarried fathers (Isacco, Garfield, & Rogers, 2010). In another study using the same data set with unmarried fathers, Edin, Tach, and Mincy (2009) discovered that not only did father involvement decline when the couples broke up, but by the time the child had reached age five, one-third of nonresident fathers had completely lost contact with their child. While divorced fathers tend to coparent more and stay more involved with their children than nonmarried fathers, the trend is still towards less contact with the child (and therefore less coparenting with the mother) over time (Seltzer, 2000). Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) argued that for many men, fatherhood and marriage are "a package deal." Not marrying the mother or divorcing the mother signals to these men that active fathering and coparenting are optional. Mothers may also internalize this cultural norm and lower their expectations of active fathering and coparenting after the break up of the couple relationship (Doherty et al., 1998).

Studies of nonmarital fathers suggest their involvement must be seen in the light of the coparenting relationship, not just as a dyadic variable. When nonresidential fathers exercise authoritative parenting and cooperate with the mother, child well-being is positively affected (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Both of these factors must be in place: positive authoritative parenting and positive coparenting in the form of payment of child support and cooperative child rearing. In other words, both healthy dyadic and triadic functioning—parenting and coparenting—need to be present for the well-being of children. And both of these forms of functioning are affected by the marital status of the parents.

More research is needed on coparenting in noncommitted cohabiting relationships, which we believe would be intermediate in quality between married and couples with severed relationships. Of course, cooperative coparenting is possible outside of an intact couple relationship, and such coparenting relationships aid children's development. But the severing of the intimate couple bond strikes a blow to the coparental relationship by creating diverging and sometimes competitive interests between the parents when it comes to parenting. Only a minority of couples are likely to overcome these obstacles well enough to have coparenting relationships that are high in harmony and cooperation and low in competition, hostility, and triangulation. A complete theoretical framework of coparenting requires attention to the influence of marital status on coparental dynamics.

Contextual Factors

With the exception of Feinberg's (2003) ecological framework about coparenting and Conger and Conger's (2002) contextual framework about farm families, little attention has been paid to the influence of factors outside of the family on coparenting. However, there is considerable research from the literature on work–family balance and from the fathering literature. In making use of the fathering literature, we are working from the assumption that factors that influence fathers' involvement with their children have at least indirect effects on the coparenting relationship.

In his ecological framework of coparenting, Feinberg (2003) notes that positive social support can strengthen coparenting relationships. Furthermore, financial pressure and work stress can have a negative impact on marital and coparenting functioning. For instance, Conger and Conger's (2002) contextual framework, based on their longitudinal study of farm families in the Midwest, showed how economic hardship is related to family well-being. The authors offered supportive evidence for an ecological framework demonstrating how economic hardship leads to economic pressure, which impacts coparenting through two sources: increased parent emotional distress and increased interparental conflict–withdrawal patterns. Both of these latter factors lead in turn to disrupted parenting and then to poorer child and adolescent adjustment. This research was replicated in a study of over 400 two-parent African American families (Conger et al., 2002).

Another important contextual factor in coparenting is employment. Parents face increasing challenges in balancing work, parenting, and family time (see Daly, 2001). Recent decades have witnessed an increase in dual earning families and in jobs requiring shift work, combined with a dramatic increase of employment opportunities for women (see Bianchi, 2000). In addition, the 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the number of temporary jobs with few benefits (Seccombe, 2000). The increase in temporary jobs has the potential to put more emotional strain on parents, and as Conger and Conger (2002) have found, makes it harder for mothers and fathers to coparent effectively. Furthermore, coparental strain can be the result of the total number of work hours per family increasing (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000), specifically in the managerial, professional, and technical occupations (Daly, 2001). These employment-related factors present challenges for contemporary parents to negotiate their coparenting roles when both parents are breadwinners at the same time that traditional cultural norms call for mothers to work a “second shift” when they come home (Hochschild, 1989).

As noted earlier, research on father involvement can be examined through a “coparenting lens” to show how shifts in father involvement influence coparenting. When fathers are less involved with their children because of contextual forces, there is less balance in the coparental relationship, and there may be more conflict and triangulation. The research reviewed by Doherty et al. (1998) is quite clear: father involvement is influenced by a variety of contextual factors, especially employment opportunities and other economic factors, and this influence is stronger for fathers than for mothers. Doherty et al. (1998) suggest that cultural norms are stricter about the centrality and the endurance of the mother–child dyad, no matter what is taking place outside the relationship. Father–child relationships, on the other hand, are seen as requiring men's success as breadwinners and protectors in the public sphere and therefore may require a greater level of support from external contexts. Fathers may withdraw from responsible fathering and coparenting as a result of contextual factors, unless their own individual level of devotion to fathering is strong and resilient.

Unfortunately, even with the explosion of coparenting theory and research over the past 15 years, there still has been little research investigating how race and ethnicity influence coparenting dynamics. One study conducted by Cabrera, Shannon, and La Talliade (2009) with Mexican American families concluded that couple conflict (mothers and fathers were asked about the quality of their couple relationship) was the strongest predictor of coparenting conflict. In another study with African American families, Brody, Flor, and Neubaum (1998) showed that harmonious interactions between parents who shared responsibilities for child rearing had positive outcomes for children. McHale et al. (2004) argue that the definition of coparenting as including a biological father and a biological mother needs to be expanded for different ethnic groups. Extended kin networks are very common with African American, Mexican American, Latino, American Indian, and Asian American families. For example, Kurrien and Vo (2004) studied South and Southeast Asian families and discovered that extended family members play valuable coparenting roles, often in dyadic coparenting relationships with mothers who are the primary caregivers. Clearly there is still a need for more research about how various ethnic groups coparent their children, keeping in mind that this may involve members of extended kin networks and “fictive” kin.

Another contextual factor in the model, broad cultural expectations, can influence how parents are involved with their children and how they coparent. In his historical studies, LaRossa (1997) has documented how cultural norms wax and wane over time for how fathers should be involved with their children, and implicitly, how fathers and mothers should coparent. The emergence in the 1970s of the expectation for cooperative labor and delivery of babies, with fathers actively participating in the process, is an example of how cultural norms influence coparenting practices. More research on cultural expectations about coparenting needs to be done.

Mother Factors

Numerous studies have shown that mothers’ expectations about father involvement have a direct influence on how fathers are involved with their children, and thus, indirectly, on the kind of coparenting relationship mothers have with the father (Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2001). In general, research suggests that mothers’ expectations for fathers’ behavior are more influential than fathers’ own expectations for their own behavior. For example, Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) concluded that lower levels of maternal support for fathers in their paternal roles leads to lower levels of paternal competence. Furthermore, Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, and Sokolowski (2008) discovered that maternal encouragement was positively correlated with increased father involvement, even when controlling for the quality of the coparental relationship and fathers’ views about their paternal roles.

Mother’s work experience is also a contributor to coparenting, beyond ways we discussed earlier. Women seem to be happier at home and work when they have flexible workplace options, they are supported in their jobs by their partners, and they can afford high-quality daycare (Arendell, 2000). Mothers tend to experience more work–family tension than fathers, since mothers are more likely to be interrupted at work about a family issue than are fathers (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000). Notably, Galinsky’s (1999) interviews with children indicate that it is not women entering the workforce that has negative effects on children, but the degree of work stress experienced by both mothers and fathers that affects children’s well-being. This body of research has implications for

the study of coparenting, because mothers' experiences of work-home stress might influence their expectations about father involvement and the coparenting relationship, and because fathers' cooperation or lack of cooperation with mothers' expectations might be an important source of coparental conflict.

Father Factors

We have argued that the large literature on father involvement supports the idea that more involved fathers are more active coparents. Studies also clearly demonstrate a positive association between fathers' psychological well-being and their involvement with their children (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Carrano, 2010; Pleck, 1997). Fathers who feel competent about themselves as parents are more involved with their children and adolescents (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985; Pleck, 1997). For example, two recent studies using the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey (a diverse sample of nationally representative of unmarried and married fathers) found that fathers' mental health (levels of depression and anxiety) was the strongest predictor of positive coparenting support (Isacco, Garfield, & Rogers, 2010), and higher levels of paternal stress were correlated with lower levels of supportive coparenting (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2010).

A father's sense of psychological well-being may also be connected to his family of origin experiences. Studies based on fathers' retrospective reports of childhood have shown how secure attachments for fathers are associated with securely attached infants (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1999; Steele, Steele, & Fongay, 1996). For example, Steele and colleagues (1996), with a sample of married couples and their 18-month-old children, found that both mothers' and fathers' secure attachments in adulthood predicted infants' secure attachment. By contrast, studies have also shown that some men who experienced little affection from their own fathers compensate for this negative family of origin experience by being highly affectionate with their own children (Beaton & Doherty, 2007). As well, Snarey (1993), in a 35-year longitudinal study, showed how men who experienced distant fathers during their childhood were more involved with the social emotional development of their adolescent children. Therefore, both negative and positive family-of-origin experiences can lead to fathers being more involved with their children and being more active coparents.

On the other hand, research needs to be conducted to examine the possible offsetting influence of father involvement on coparenting, such as increased conflict between parents. Clearly more research is needed that investigates fathers' expectations of maternal involvement in coparenting, especially as it relates to mothers' participation in the paid labor force. As mentioned before, father's employment characteristics play a significant role in father involvement. Fathers who lose their job generally struggle emotionally, and this adversely affects their involvement with their children (Pleck, 1997). In addition, greater work flexibility and profamily policies are associated with more father involvement. Furthermore, research indicates that mothers' work schedules have more effect on father involvement than fathers' work schedules, because fathers are more involved with their children when mothers enter the paid workforce (Pleck, 1997). Researchers can examine how fathers' employment situations influence their everyday coparenting practices with mothers.

Child Factors

Recently, researchers have discovered how child factors play a pivotal role in influencing supportive coparenting. We suggest four areas that might be especially fruitful: gender,

age, number of siblings, and child characteristics (e.g., temperament). With regard to gender, Brown et al. (2010) found that boys formed stronger attachments with both parents than girls when higher levels of supportive coparenting were reported by parents. In another study McHale (1995) examined how the interplay between the quality of the marital relationship and a child's gender can affect parental involvement. He found that when the parents are in marital distress boys are more likely to encounter hostile competitive coparenting, whereas girls are more likely to encounter larger discrepancies in coparental involvement. This is not to suggest that fathers are not just as enamored with their girls as with their boys, but that during marital conflict men may draw closer to sons in a triangle with their wives (McHale et al., 2002). A child's gender seems to influence father involvement more than mother involvement. Fathers tend to be more involved with their sons, especially when their sons get older, perhaps because fathers identify more easily with their older sons (Pleck, 1997). These gender patterns may have especially important implications for coparenting dynamics in families with adolescents.

We also suggest that age of the child and number of children bear attention as influences on coparenting. Coparenting young children may require more physical labor from parents, and more "tag-team" coparenting, whereas older children may require more difficult decision making by coparents. The number of siblings, and the need to divide parenting attention among them, may also be an important influence on coparenting practices. Coalitions between children might influence coparenting just as a coalition between a parent and a child does. As mentioned previously, little theory or research has examined coparenting relationships with multiple children. Different children present different challenges in parenting and coparenting.

Finally, there has been a dramatic increase in research on how child characteristics, primarily child's temperament, influence coparenting. Burney and Leerkes (2010) discovered that an infant's temperament at six months predicts mothers' and fathers' supportive coparenting practices. For both mothers and fathers, coparenting was affected by the infant's reactivity. Fathers reported more negative coparenting with a reactive infant when there was a poor marital relationship. Mothers reported a more negative coparenting relationship with a reactive infant only if they could not comfort the infant easily or if they were not satisfied with the division of parenting duties. Cook, Schoppe-Sullivan, Buckley, and Davis (2009), with a sample of mothers, fathers, and preschoolers found that couples who had children with higher levels of negative effect also demonstrated more behaviors that negatively influenced effective coparenting. Finally, Davis, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, and Brown (2009) followed mothers, fathers, and their infants during the infant's first year of life. For fathers, challenging infant temperament issues at 3.5 months were linked to a decrease in cooperative coparenting over the first year of life, measured at 13 months. These findings indicate that child characteristics, like temperament, play a critical role in promoting positive coparenting, and that mothers and fathers are affected in different ways by child characteristics. Researchers are only beginning to understand how individual child characteristics affect mother's and father's parenting practices, coparenting relationship, and marital health.

Future Directions in Coparenting Research

Here we summarize some of the gaps in the current research on coparenting and propose new areas for research investigation, and future intervention. First, with the exception of Feinberg, Kan, and Hetherington (2007), the vast majority of research related to

coparenting focuses on the pregnancy through toddler years and particularly neglects coparenting relationships during adolescence and young adulthood. Feinberg and colleagues followed mothers and fathers and their adolescents for a three-year period. They found that coparenting conflict in raising adolescents was a key variable in predicting higher levels of marital conflict, and that coparenting conflict was associated with higher levels of parental negativity and adolescent problems. This gap in adolescent coparenting research is especially important to close because, as Margolin et al. (2001) note, coparenting may become harder as children get older. Parents tend to cooperate more when children are young and disagree more about parenting when children become adolescents. More research is needed with older children even beyond adolescence/young adulthood, as more children are living longer at home (or leaving home and returning again); therefore, many mothers and fathers are coparenting their children for many more years than in the recent past. In addition, research needs to follow families over time to study how the coparenting relationship evolves as the family develops, from parenting in the infant years through parenting in the young adult years.

Second, researchers are only starting to investigate how children participate in socially constructing the coparenting relationship. The bidirectional nature of parent-child relationships has long been a focus of the literature on child development, with children seen as playing an active role in shaping dyadic parent-child interactions. The same case can be made for triadic interactions. For example, Fivaz-Depeursinge, Lopes, Python, and Favez (2009) have shown in a number of longitudinal studies how cues from infants have a direct impact on triadic interactions, as well as on mothers' and fathers' responses to infants. Further research is needed that looks at how children influence coparental interactions, including accounting for children's gender, age of child, and multiple children. For example, research is needed on why fathers seem to place more importance on their relationships with their sons, and whether this increases over time as sons become adolescents. Father involvement (and therefore his part of the coparenting team) seems to be more susceptible to fluctuations depending on children's gender and age, than does mother involvement. As mentioned, virtually no research exists about coparenting multiple children. Family therapists have known for years that the more individuals involved in the family, the more complex the family dynamics and interactions.

Third, as noted earlier, there has been little research that focuses on coparenting among diverse cultural and racial groups, and family forms. As much as theorists have advocated for coparenting research with diverse samples over the past 10 years, the overwhelming majority of coparenting research samples are still comprised of white, middle class, married mothers and fathers. The rise in interracial marriages and parenting also presents an opportunity to expand our understanding of the roles of race and ethnicity in coparenting, both at the nuclear family level and at the extended family and community levels. Furthermore, many children are being raised in homes with one parent, and often there are other important family and community members who function as coparents (e.g., grandparents). This is often the case with generational extended kin networks that are common within racially diverse families. In addition, many children are now spending substantial time in stepfamilies and there is a need for expanding coparenting research to this complex family form. Indeed, coparenting research could be enriched by comparing findings across biological, stepfamily, never-married, and postdivorce family structures in order to tease out what is core to successful coparenting across contexts and what is dependent on family structure. Finally, research is needed on coparenting with gay and lesbian families, an increasingly visible group of families.

Fourth, there is limited empirical evidence in our theoretical framework in the area of contextual factors, such as employment, cultural expectations for parental roles, and community support (see Feinberg, 2003). For example, in our increasingly busy world, more research is needed that studies how both mothers' and fathers' work schedules affect parental involvement. In addition, more research is needed about evolving cultural expectations for marriage and parental involvement, and subsequently how these expectations affect supportive coparenting relationships. Furthermore, community expectations and support for effective coparenting can have a dramatic impact on family well-being.

Beyond these straightforward next steps in coparenting research, we offer ideas for bolder steps in terms of intervention for both mothers and fathers early on in the development of their coparenting relationship. Since marital status is a strong predictor for effective coparenting, early intervention that focuses on both the marital and coparenting relationship including both mothers and fathers is critical. In the last 10 years there have been a few successful coparenting interventions that we are aware of (see Doherty, Erikson, & LaRossa, 2006; Feinberg, Jones, Kan, & Goslin, 2010), and an innovative coparenting intervention that has focused on teen fathers (see Fagan, 2008). As mentioned earlier, more research is needed with culturally and racially diverse families, and therefore, obviously more intervention is needed as well. The results from two recent research studies with the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study were clear that marital status and income are important predictors of supportive coparenting for fathers (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009; Isacco, Garfield, & Rogers, 2010). Interventions need to be developed for mothers and fathers from diverse family backgrounds. Finally, interventions need to be developed that focus beyond the pregnancy and toddler years that specifically target the adolescence and young adulthood years. The explosion of coparenting theory and research over the past 15 years has laid the foundation for effective coparenting interventions focused on helping families across the lifespan engage in supportive coparenting relationships.

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